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Inclusive Spirituality: The Bodhisattva Kuan-yin as Moral Exemplar and Self-Cultivation in a Malaysian Dharma House

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Based on an ethnographic study of a lay Buddhist organization in contemporary Malaysia called the Kuan-yin Contemplative Order (KYCO), this paper looks into the inclusive spiritualism KYCO engenders by situating the organization and the religious universalism from which it emerges in the cultural and historical context of “redemptive societies”—a religious tradition that was established during the late imperial era of China and exploded during the early twentieth century into the cities and spread to Southeast Asia. While the ongoing racial politics and simmering religious tensions in Malaysia limit what followers of KYCO can realistically hope to achieve in terms of realizing a more peaceful and equitable existence, these perennial issues and challenges do not stop them from pursuing the ideals of the Bodhisattva—one who out of compassion delays her/his own salvation until all others have been saved from suffering.

Keywords: self-cultivation, morality, inclusive spiritualism, redemptive societies, Malaysia

Introduction

I readily agreed to join in the Vesak¹⁾ day procession that was to be held on a weekend evening of May 2008. No prior registration was required nor forms to be filled. I just needed to show up at the Maha Vihara Buddhist temple in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, joining my friends from the Kuan-yin Contemplative Order (KYCO)—a lay Buddhist organization. They stood out in their crisp all-white attire, looking fresh and clean. There

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1) Vesak is a holiday observed by Buddhists in many countries. Vesak commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha. It falls on a full moon day, typically during the fifth or sixth lunar month of the year.

were 11 of them from KYCO that evening. Kiat,²⁾ one of the most active members of KYCO and the coordinator for this outing, was happy to see me there and delighted that I had worn the white KYCO polo shirt as well. Someone from the group pointed at my dark blue cap and said with good humor, “You look like you are from UMNO.” It was a stark reminder of the recent watershed general election of March 2008, which had seen the biggest loss for the ruling Malay party—UMNO—in its history (although the party still maintained a precarious majority).³⁾ I was perturbed by that insinuation, because UMNO is not only the ruling party of the country but also an exclusively and dominantly ethnic Malay political party, and the comment reminded me uncomfortably of my place as an outsider.

The atmosphere was festive as we marched along the 10 km route that weaved through the city of Kuala Lumpur. However, the mood in my group was subdued and somber, in contrast to the joyous singing and easy camaraderie amongst other marchers. Kiat proposed that we “contemplate on the sufferings of the world” and “dedicate merit generated from the march to those who are suffering.” Although the march was not physically arduous and I secretly found it to be enjoyable, Kiat invoked the effort as a spiritual struggle of sorts, dedicating it to all beings—humans and non-humans in this world as well as others.

Going home that night, my mind was occupied by the image of these Chinese middle-class English-speaking devotees from KYCO dressed in white marching solemnly, in contrast to the celebratory atmosphere of the Vesak day procession. They stood out in their all-white outfit as a marker of purity and virtue, and demonstrated visually the relationship between the body’s corporeality and morality.⁴⁾ Kiat’s reference to suffering

2) Out of respect to religious sensitivities in Malaysia and to protect confidentiality, most names in this paper are pseudonyms.

3) UMNO stands for United Malays National Organisation. It is the dominant political party amongst 13 other parties organized along ethnic and communal lines, in the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional (BN). Other component parties of BN include the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan or Malaysia’s Peoples Movement). During the general election of March 2008, BN lost its two-thirds majority in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives), which it had held since independence in August 1957; 82 parliamentary seats and 5 states went to a newly formed coalition, the Pakatan Rakyat (People’s Alliance or PR) led by former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. The election marked the start of a series of power struggles between and within these two political groups. See also “Malaysia in 2009: Confronting Old Challenges through a New Leadership” (Singh 2010).

4) In Buddhism, “beautiful bodies” serve as visible markers of, and are presumed to be the karmic effects of, morality. For example, it is written in the Pali Buddhist canon “Digha Nikaya” that the Buddha is reported to have borne 32 greater and 80 lesser marks held to be distinguished qualities of the body. Thus, a description of a person’s physical features and appearances may serve as a commentary of his or her moral character (Mrozić 2004).

seemed to set things in a certain perspective—suffering is central to Buddhism, where the world is depicted as suffering and a solution is sought to the end of suffering⁵—but his call to contemplate on the world’s sufferings invoked moral empathy, prompting “something that depends on intellectual and practical disciplines” (Asad 1993, 62).

I am moved by my friends’ actions in which they seek to dedicate themselves to help all beings. By doing so they manifest not only Buddhist compassion but, more important, a spirit of inclusiveness and universalism. Their actions are grounded in aspirations not necessarily realized in the (protective) powers acquired through meditation and disciplinary practices that normally accrue to magical monks and/or meditation masters in Thai, Laotian, or Burmese Buddhism (Houtman 1997; Cook 2010; McDaniel 2011). Instead, KYCO followers aspire toward moral transformation through self-cultivation practices where spiritual accomplishment and morality are demonstrated by the exemplary life and conduct of charismatic lay masters and gifted adepts.

This paper seeks to describe some of these moral aspirations and spiritual experiences, examining the self-cultivation practices and inclusive spiritualism that give rise to them by situating KYCO and the religious universalism from which it emerges in the cultural and historical context of “redemptive societies”—a religious tradition that was established in the late imperial era of China and exploded during the early twentieth century into the cities and spread to Southeast Asia.

Kuan-yin Contemplative Order: Inclusive Spiritualism

The arguments in this paper emerge from fieldwork conducted from 2008 to 2009 at KYCO during which I observed firsthand the activities that KYCO followers carry out in order to fulfill or realize the Bodhisattva Vow⁶ they have undertaken. I also analyzed

5) The notion of suffering also requires us to attend to the idea of embodiment—that is, that human action and experience are sited in a material body—as well as the idea of the body as an “integrated totality having developable capacities for activity and experience unique to it, the capacities for sensing, imagining, and doing that are culturally mediated” (Asad 1993, 89). I argue that the body’s ability to suffer and respond to suffering, as well as to use its own suffering in social relationships by empathizing with others, constitute the conduct and experiences of KYCO marchers during the Vesak day procession of 2008.

6) In Mahayana Buddhist practice, vow taking underscores a compelling desire to cultivate compassion and is such a highly esteemed virtue that every new aspirant is advised to take the Bodhisattva Vow, which speaks of self-sacrifice and solidarity. Adapted from the Mahayana Bodhisattva Vow, the KYCO version is as follows: “All beings without number, I vow to liberate. Endless blind passions, I vow to uproot. Dharma Doors beyond measure, I vow to penetrate. The great way of Buddha, I vow to attain.”

KYCO newsletters and magazines containing personal essays, stories, and poems written by followers. The people whom I befriended at KYCO were happy to assist and facilitate my study. They were welcoming of my presence because they perceived it as the work of the divine that had brought me to them, and which they hoped would ultimately lead me to the discovery and achievement of my own goals, spiritually speaking.

In the heartlands of Petaling Jaya—or “PJ” as locals affectionately call it—the suburban residential city southwest of Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, people gather regularly at KYCO, located in a nondescript twin double-story link-house, to pray, chant sutras, sing hymns, and listen to Dharma lectures. The KYCO membership consists mainly of urban middle-class ethnic Chinese who are accountants, bankers, managers, lecturers, doctors, computer executives, secretaries, and businessmen as well as retirees and housewives. On festival days, when attendance is highest, thousands of people might pass through the house. Devotees wearing their all-white ensemble descend upon the quiet neighborhood in their Toyota, Honda, Proton, and the occasional Mercedes-Benz sedans. Most people come for the blessings, some for the healing—both spiritual and physical—that are offered by the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin. Many are devout followers, like my friend Kiat, who goes to renew his spiritual and moral vows as well as make new ones.

KYCO was inspired and founded in 1979 by Tony Wong Kuan Ming to fulfill a personal pledge: it was a commitment to “save the world,” but the salvational or redemptive imperatives would become clearer to Tony only in later years. Born in 1940 Kuala Lumpur into a Chinese Catholic household, Tony was the son of a millionaire. He led a self-professed privileged life and was cared for as a boy by *ah-mahs* (bonded servants) in his household. He received a formative English-based education at Christian missionary schools in Kuala Lumpur. In the late 1970s Tony’s brother Nelson was diagnosed with cancer, and the news devastated his family emotionally. Tony was affected particularly badly, and during his brother’s sickness he (Tony) was “visited” by various Chinese deities who urged him to pray to the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin and start up a congregation of Kuan-yin followers and devotees.

In 1979, Tony began gathering a few friends and colleagues to venerate Kuan-yin and learn about Buddhism at his office. Over time, he acquired a reputation as a healer and teacher of the Buddhist Dharma. Later on, with a sizeable following, he was transformed into Master Tony Wong or “Sifu”—a respectful Cantonese⁷⁾ term that people use to address him. He is now known mainly as a teacher who delivers the Buddhist Dharma in English, teaching in a way that is considered by his followers to be accessible and use-

7) Cantonese, rather than Mandarin, is the lingua franca of the Chinese community in Kuala Lumpur.

ful for the ordinary person. He addresses problems that relate to family, work, and personal well-being, casting and reframing them under the light of Buddhist compassion and moral rhetoric.

The charismatic persona of leadership is not unique to contemporary religious or spiritual organizations; for instance, the successes of Sai Baba's following, New Age religions, and Christian mega-churches have always hinged upon the skill and popularity of their leaders. The leadership of Sifu or Master Tony Wong as a male authority figure is a central feature of KYCO. Charismatic leadership, alongside the fostering of a family-like atmosphere that is conducive to experiences of emotional security, spiritual effervescence, and moral rhetoric contribute to the appeal of KYCO for many of its followers.

KYCO's leadership structure may be described as patriarchal. Sifu Tony Wong as the founder-leader assumes the most authoritative role along with "lay clergy": an inner circle of disciples composed of men and women who are appointed to take charge of ritual duties as well as manage the day-to-day operations of the organization. Entry into this inner core group is coveted by many KYCO followers, including my friend Kiat, but it is decided solely by Sifu, who assesses potential disciples based on their spiritual potential and level of commitment to KYCO. Leadership revolves around Sifu and two of his most senior male disciples, who are exceptional hands-on managers. This centralized patriarchal style of leadership has remained strong over the years. Because of its highly syncretic and non-sectarian pronouncement, KYCO does not subject itself directly to monastic authority; it develops and teaches its own Dharma. Monastic authority serves as a symbolic purpose for KYCO; hence, its relationship with Buddhist organizations and temples can be regarded as competitive rather than hierarchical or complementary.

Through his followers, Sifu has cultivated many close relationships with Tibetan monks and lamas, Sai Baba devotees, spiritual adepts, and local nonsectarian humanitarian figures. Sifu is a key proponent of the Vajrayana Buddhist Council of Malaysia, which was formed in 2000 to represent the Vajrayana Buddhist community and to work with other Buddhist groups in Malaysia. This Vajrayana Buddhist umbrella organization comprises KYCO as well as other Tibetan-based Buddhist organizations, branches, and temples in Malaysia.

The network of affiliations exemplifies the nonsectarian, eclectic, and communal ethos of KYCO. More important, the network is constructed along the lines of affective relationship and personalized interaction. For Sifu and his followers, this relationship is maintained by the regularity of the Dharma sessions and activities at KYCO.

KYCO's membership number is modest, but the organization can draw upon tremendous support from followers and donors during fund-raising and other important festive as well as philanthropic events. In the context of the Petaling Jaya area, with an

urban population of over 450,000, and the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan population of 1.5 million, the establishment and steady growth of urban middle-class spiritual organizations such as KYCO and the socioeconomic wealth and resources they represent are significant developments.

KYCO followers are active supporters of Tibetan Buddhist clergies on the Dharma-dispensing-cum-fund-raising world circuit. In the global scheme of things, they are tapped into the local chapter of the international Sai Baba network; they also engage in local charities and organize spiritual tours to Sai Baba's headquarters in Puttaparthi, India, as well as Buddhist and Taoist temples in China and Taiwan. Through these activities, they participate in a transnational flow of funds, personnel, activities, and events that encompasses and expands self-cultivation as a spiritual field that dovetails with the growth of a self-help milieu promulgated by a burgeoning global consumer market for self-cultivation or self-help literature, media programs, workshops, retreats, and wellness centers promising to heal, restore, and rejuvenate the soul and to make the world a better place.

KYCO's membership expanded gradually and spiked during the 1990s, an era when the Sixth Malaysia Plan was rolled out by then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. The 1991 plan outlined a rapid economic program that envisioned the transformation of Malaysia into a "fully developed country" by the year 2020. The plan also outlined cultural goals to be achieved alongside economic growth. Primary among those were the making of a "liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colors and creeds would be free to practice and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs" (Mahathir 1991) and the vision of a "united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny" (*ibid.*) that upended the postcolonial ideology asserting Malay ethnicity as the national identity. It was a powerful and compelling motion of unity and inclusiveness that encouraged the nascent development of nondenominational philanthropic spiritual movements in Malaysia: during this time, the Taiwan-based humanitarian-work-oriented Tzu Chi organization expanded through the outreach efforts of a Taiwanese businessman and his wife based in Melaka (Huang 2009, 247–266); Yiguandao—a Chinese spiritual sect banned in Singapore—put down roots in Malaysia and gained a nationwide following (Soo 1998); the Sai Baba movement grew rapidly (Kent 2005); and charity organizations such as the Pure Life Society, led by spiritually inspired local figures such as Mother Mangalam, captured the imagination and wide support of Malaysians regardless of their race, language, or religion. Together, these entities constitute what could be considered a grass-roots spiritual movement that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries with an emphasis on social action and spiritual salvation, charity, and self-cultivation.

Many of their philanthropic and spiritual pursuits are aimed at social as well as per-

sonal enrichment. Their membership comprises predominantly well-educated middle-class, middle-aged professionals and businessmen who fraternize in these congregations to network and seek outlets for their shared spiritual and emotional needs. The same people can often be found in different spiritual and philanthropic organizations.

KYCO is part of this grassroots religious movement. Tapped into a network of social as well as business relations, it contributes to the discourse and practice of “civility” and “participation” by advocating Buddhist compassion and adopting an inclusive spiritualism that does not require people to give up their own religions or beliefs or philanthropy. It transgresses boundaries of race, language, religion as well as binaries of good and evil, right and wrong—not by proclaiming ultimate truths but by promulgating a quasi-religious quality of “civility” in public association and interaction that generates peace and respect for others. The political anthropologist Robert Hefner proposes that civility, when added to the “structural reality of civic association,” could bring about the development of a “civil society” (Hefner 2001, 10–11). Weaving individual spiritual and social goals that reinforce and intertwine with each other often blurs the distinction between the needs of the individual versus community, and self versus others. Much of this blurring is embodied in the personal convictions and charisma of Sifu Tony Wong and some of his closest disciples, whose efforts are aimed at making KYCO a meaningful presence in the lives of its followers.

KYCO devotees and followers value the personal and communal relations as well as the moral and spiritual upliftment the organization provides. Sifu Tony Wong is often cited as the primary reason why they support KYCO: they appreciate his teachings, which focus on the “essentials” of Buddhist teachings and have general applicability in cultivating personal wellness as well as the collective well-being of society. In the context of Malaysia’s difficult racial and religious politics, KYCO’s inclusive message of spirituality and morality is poignant yet powerful. Some scholars have come to the conclusion that adherence to the religious or spiritual moral principles of compassion, kindness, empathy, and even philanthropic work does not have a significant impact on civil society. Contrary to these opinions, KYCO demonstrates how personal efficacy is generated through practices and discourses that become political practices however apolitical or anti-political they may appear or claim to be. I argue that KYCO’s spiritually informed notion of inclusiveness continues to be relevant for many Malaysians, with power being drawn not from political institutions but through self-cultivation practices whose moral purpose is to sustain, promote, and uplift life.

Redemptive Societies, Self-Cultivation and Kuan-yin Veneration

The moral rhetoric of self-cultivation practices is reproduced in the notion of Bodhisattvas or Buddhist saints who vow to work for the good of all beings by renouncing their own enlightenment or salvation until all have been saved. Bodhisattvas epitomize the highest ethical standards in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition because “they dedicate themselves in all their lifetimes to rescuing living beings from various kinds of suffering” (Mrozik 2004, 176).

The idea that it is possible and desirable to attain or acquire certain qualities and transform oneself into a better person or a more superior form of being through self-cultivation has been present in Chinese religious, philosophical, and medical traditions. Self-cultivation, generally understood to be a set of mental and physical routines, is undertaken as an individual practice or in groups. Varieties of self-cultivation are found in Buddhist, Taoist, as well as Confucian traditions; in traditional Chinese medical teachings; and in the bio-spiritual practice of qigong and Chinese martial arts. All these different traditions and practices of self-cultivation share the common idea that humans can attain a stage of perfection (in whatever ways the traditions dictate or determine what that perfection is) through physical and mental disciplines (Palmer and Liu 2012; Penny 2012).

Self-cultivation popularized through Chinese redemptive societies during the turbulent Chinese Republican era of the early twentieth century achieved a particular social and political salience in China as well as among Chinese communities in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. The term “redemptive societies” was coined by Prasenjit Duara in his study of Manchukuo—the Japanese state established in the Chinese northeast (Manchuria) between 1932 and 1945 (Duara 2003). Later scholars have used the term to describe and identify groups such as Falun Gong (Ownby 2008) and Dejjiao (Formoso 2010). Redemptive societies that emerged out of the troubled times at the turn of the twentieth century in China “urged the extinguishing of worldly desires and engagement in moral action” (*ibid.*, 103), retaining sectarian traditions and scriptures as well as popular practices such as divination, spirit writing, and so on. These spiritual and historical traditions provided ideas and notions of sovereignty for the project of nation making and modernization in Manchukuo.

Redemptive cults such as Dao De-hui (Morality Society), Daoyuan (Society of the Way), Zailijiao (The Teaching of the Abiding Principle), Shijie Zongjiao Datong-hui (Society for the Great Unity of World Religions), and Yiguandao (Way of Pervading Unity) claimed a following of 7 million to 30 million people in China from the 1930s to the 1940s (*ibid.*). These organizations taught and put into practice a universalizing and syncretic

form of Chinese Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Members of contemporary redemptive societies were usually drawn from the cities and urban townships. They included the local gentry and officials who came together to partake in philanthropic activities such as disaster relief, poverty alleviation, education, the teaching of virtues including charity and filial piety, as well as self-cultivation.

Adapting to the times by incorporating major religious traditions and teachings, redemptive societies focused on the idioms of self-cultivation, knowledge, and the rhetoric of “saving the world” from physical destruction and moral impairment. Moral and spiritual goals as well as processes were pitted against hedonistic materialism, and communal as well as community needs were put before self-interest. Popular concerns about moral progress and the rhetoric of universal redemption came to be associated with “civilizational ideals and practices” of *wenming*⁸⁾ (文明, Chinese civilization) and *jiaohua*⁹⁾ (教化, moral transformation) (Duara 2003, 105–106) with the explicit aim of teaching the truths of “heaven” and the “way” to transform selves and society, and to “urge towards a transcendent universalism” (*ibid.*) or restore the “glory of ancient civilization” (Formoso 2010).

Thus, redemptive societies not only embodied virtues of an older moral order, they were also engaged in the reconstruction of communities and society along utopian visions of the future. Self-cultivation, then, would lead to the achievement of civilized nobility or *wen* (文). The cultivation of a strong inner spirit, *neisheng* (内圣), that matched the outer/worldly dimension of *waiwang*¹⁰⁾ (外王) constituted a fundamental practice of redemptive societies (Duara 2003, 103–104). Therefore, self-cultivation practices included “outer” or outward expressions of kindness such as the performing of charity or charitable deeds as well as “inner” practices of moral and spiritual introspection, maintaining abstinences, and the observation of a moral code or behavior and bodily comportment. For the political aspirants and community leaders among members of redemptive societies, they advocated the development of a strong inner spiritual dimen-

8) In this context, *wenming* refers to the Chinese intellectual discourse of civilization that emerged during the late nineteenth century where elites from inside and outside the imperial court were concerned about the “backwardness” of Chinese society. They had contesting ideas about modernizing and reforming the government as well as differing ideologies regarding sovereignty and civilization (see also Duara 2003, 89–129).

9) *Jiaohua* refers to the moral transformation of the person as well as society. The term is rooted in the Confucianist imperial ideology “to morally transform by means of virtuous rule” (Duara 2003, 106). It emphasizes social propriety and obligations rooted in cosmological “truths,” and is deeply connected to the discourse of *wenming* or civilization.

10) *Waiwang* literally means “outer king” (Duara 2003, 108). It is premised on a Chinese spiritual dialectic of the internal or “inner sage” (*neisheng*) i.e. the mind: emotions and thoughts, and the external or “outer king” (*waiwang*) of the body: behavior and conduct.

sion through “moral religious cultivation of the individual spirit and body” (*ibid.*, 105) to match an outer dimension of engaging in worldly affairs through philanthropic enterprises and public works. Thus, self-cultivation prescribes for the elites as well as the politically ambitious a way of connecting the inner state—hopes, aspirations, and passions that constitute a sense of self—with outer social and political action.

Describing the redemptive societies project as a “civilizing process,” Duara highlights its mission to enlighten or teach and transform social morality through virtuous rule and self-cultivation. Redemptive societies such as the Morality Society, Yiguandao, and Red Swastika were lay religious congregations that espoused an ideology of universal salvation promoting a syncretism of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which gained popularity amongst Confucian gentry and the Buddhist as well as Taoist laity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in the twentieth century came to encompass and adapt world religions, including Islam and Christianity (*ibid.*, 103–104). They sought to distill “truths” from these traditions and to synthesize religious as well as moral visions with a scientific view of the world. They adopted a social organization along the lines of a Christian model of “religion,” with “a church hierarchy, Sunday prayers, missions, journals, and even, in some cases baptism” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 95). Claiming to represent “religious modernity in its universal dimension” (*ibid.*), redemptive societies were highly effective in mobilizing members into large organizations of adepts who engaged in a variety of self-cultivation and devotional practices as well as in performing emergency relief work.

Redemptive societies had national reach, with provincial and municipal organizations registered under the post-imperial Chinese state as philanthropic public associations. They were characterized by a distinct mode of authority and a leadership system that emphasized an intimate master-disciple relationship, a fraternity of brotherhood constituted by a closed group of adepts, and a network of followers and practitioners who operated within a broad moralistic discourse (Goossaert 2008, 25–26).

KYCO’s emergence during the 1980s coincided with a flourishing of redemptive societies led by Dejjiao (Formoso 2010) and Yiguandao (Soo 1998) in Malaysia, when branches, prayer halls, and family shrines were set up on the advice and request of relatives, friends, and colleagues who were sect members from Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. However, the newly formed sects faced tremendous pressure and consternation from religious bodies such as the Malaysian Buddhist Association and the local Chinese press, who accused and depicted sect members as “heretics,” “foreign swindlers,” “deviant,” “evil,” and “anti-social.” Yiguandao was banned in Taiwan until 1987 and is still considered to be illegal in China due to its “alleged close ties with the Japanese puppet government at Manchukuo during the Sino-Japanese war, and partly due to the

hostile views held towards it by leaders of the more orthodox Buddhist groups” (Lim 2011, 7). In July 1981 Singapore expelled and blacklisted 12 Taiwanese Yiguandao members for spreading heretic teachings (Soo 1998, 155), but this only further strengthened the group’s resolve:

One direct consequence of this early negative experience was the decision by Taiwan-based leadership to establish a chemical factory in Singapore as a front for missionary activities and as a viable source of funds for the expansion of the group in Singapore and the region. In 1981, the group formally registered in Singapore as the Hua Yuan Hui, essentially identifying itself publicly as a moral uplifting society and charitable organization, and not as Yiguandao and an explicitly religious organization. In fact, the name of Hua Yuan Hui in Singapore suggested both an orientation towards Chinese traditional culture that might appeal to the Chinese population in the country, as well as to fit into the state’s effort to cultivate moral citizens through the re-acquaintance of the “traditional culture” of one’s ethnicity. (Lim 2011, 8)

The Malaysian Chinese media picked up on the negative public perception resulting from Singapore’s expulsion of the 12 Taiwanese Yiguandao members and cast a similar lens onto the situation in Malaysia. It highlighted a public quarrel between individuals that implicated sect teachings and practices suggesting moral impropriety. With significant encouragement from the Chinese press, a grassroots vigilante group to combat “hereticism” was formed by one of the antagonists in the quarrel, and it attracted a handful of supporters. Finally, in 1993, the Malaysian Ministry of Home Affairs stepped in to issue a warning against the “illegal preaching” and “propagation of heretical teaching” that caused “disunity among Chinese communities” while reiterating the government’s policy of religious freedom and its guarantee under the Malaysian Constitution (Soo 1998, 165).

Not unlike their innovative redemptive society counterparts, serious KYCO followers cast themselves as spiritual cultivators, take the Bodhisattva Vow, and adopt a gentle, caring, humble, and faithful disposition. They learn to accept Sifu’s teachings with humility and respect, practice self-cultivation, and strive toward a moral life, convinced that moral discipline and self-cultivation are an efficacious way to mediate the consequences of karma as a form of “retribution from past actions” or “inescapable Fate” (Van der Veer 1989, 458).

Here, KYCO devotees share with their religious counterparts in Buddhism and Taoism a basic adherence to the following tenets. First, the universe is believed to comprise benevolent (as well as malevolent) spirits and divine entities. Second, historical religious figures such as the Buddha, Jesus Christ, etc., as well as contemporary ones such as Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011)—the Hindu spiritual founder-leader of the international Sai Baba movement—are regarded as compelling evidence of the divine

presence in the human world. These figures are believed to be virtuous, efficacious, and responsive. Third, practical, moral, and spiritual goals are intertwined, and these goals are believed to be achieved or achievable through individual as well as collective effort rather than through belief or faith alone. Through these efforts to be awakened and thus to be free from suffering, devotees aspire toward positive changes in their lives and within themselves. They invest their time and energy in self-cultivation practices such as contemplation, praying, chanting, and charity that fulfill personal aspirations; reinforce fortitude; give meaning; emphasize feelings and cathartic sensations; and embody caring and giving as well as belonging and laboring. These self-cultivation practices enact feelings of doing right and good, which may be discerned and understood as moral or ethical practices (Zigon 2013).

The character and ethos of redemptive societies—particularly lay voluntary organizations—the emphasis on moral transformation, and the practice of self-cultivation have been built on the foundation of Kuan-yin veneration, which could perhaps be described as “personal fulfillment” for devotees (Lee and Ackerman 1997, 68). Kuan-yin is a powerful symbol of compassion and efficacy: devotees believe that Kuan-yin offers protection for women and children as well as relief for those who experience suffering. Scholars suggest that the popularity of Kuan-yin among Chinese in Southeast Asia arose because ancestral cults, which are based on notions of lineage, lost their hold or appeal among voluntary Buddhist associations in migrant communities (Topley 1961, Nyce 1971, Baity 1975, Sangren 1983 in Lee and Ackerman 1997, 69). Kuan-yin’s popularity signaled the decline of patrilineal forms of relations and organizations due to the dominance of impersonal market conditions. Thus, Kuan-yin-venerating voluntary Buddhist associations that upheld and propagated a “universalistic kinship idiom” (Lee and Ackerman 1997, 70) were able to incorporate unrelated people of different social status, language, and ethnicity into communities that comprised members, followers, and devotees. The idea of “universal kinship” entailed new forms of social relatedness through membership and association of faith. It facilitated the development of new social organizations and relations determined by what people do and how they act in a new environment.

Organizations such as the Great Way of the Former Heaven (Topley 1963), a secretive sect that arrived with the waves of Chinese migration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, played a vital role as a voluntary Buddhist association that propagated Kuan-yin veneration in Southeast Asia. It nurtured the idiom of universal kinship that incorporated devotees into a community of “Kuan-yin’s children.” The origin of the Great Way of the Former Heaven could be traced to the Buddhist sectarian White Lotus sect, which sprang up during the fourteenth century against Mongol rule in China and played an instrumental role in the establishment of the Ming dynasty, which

reigned from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century.

Later, sect members who were wealthy Chinese merchants donated money and land to set up a series of Kuan-yin temples, including the Waterloo Street Kuan-yin temple in Singapore in 1884, which gained a reputation for efficacy. They also established a series of “vegetarian halls” that functioned as “mutual aid establishments for women who sought to live unmarried or to remain unmarried once they had been widowed” (Prazniak 1999, 229) in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia following commercial and family connections as well as philanthropic interests. All the efforts that went into establishing public temples and semi-private vegetarian halls not only contributed to the efficacy and popularity of Kuan-yin veneration but also laid the ground for the development of redemptive societies.

Compassion: Inclusive Spiritualism, Moral Reasoning, and Self-Cultivation in Practice

KYCO’s ethos of compassion symbolizes an inclusive spiritualism, morality, and self-cultivation that are embodied and expressed vividly in the everyday life and struggles of followers. Lim Kuan Meng is a Kuala Lumpur native and lifelong KYCO follower. Strongly opinionated, he has a caustic sense of humor and a wry wit to match. Nothing is too sacred for him; his sarcasm spares no one and has earned him a reputation. He is revered and respected as an elder but also quietly loathed for his acidic tongue. Mr. Lim joined KYCO more than 20 years ago through his wife, who regularly attended Sifu’s Dharma sessions. Now in their mid-60s, the couple live in nearby Petaling Jaya.

An economics graduate of the University of Malaya, Mr. Lim pursued a professional career in banking, where he reviewed and dispensed loans to individuals as well as private businesses for the most part of his working life. But several years ago he was forced into early retirement, and for a period of time he found himself in a precarious financial position. He struggled to make ends meet, relying on an irregular stream of income from periodic consulting jobs advising small companies. On a few occasions, usually after a Dharma session, we would hang out at the neighborhood coffee shop to chat. I took the chance to speak with him about his religious and spiritual pursuits. Mr. Lim disclosed that he became more serious about religion after his early retirement: he devoted one hour each morning to praying, chanting, and meditating at home. He made it quite clear to me that his spiritual practice was not just an escape into the quiet or a withdrawal into himself, but an outreach to others through charity and service, which he considers to be the most important part of his spirituality.

During my encounters with Mr. Lim, we talked frequently about the world economy. Deeply frustrated with the financial crisis of 2008, he could not come to terms with how a small elite group of men—investment bankers, driven by greed and personal gain—could make decisions that adversely affected the lives of so many people around the world. He was critical of “easy credit” consumption and felt that “real businesses” such as the small enterprises that he consulted for had to pay the price and suffer because of the tightening credit crunch. It was a spiral into a moral abyss, Mr. Lim decried. Over many late-night suppers, he gave me a gloomy prognosis of the socioeconomic situation in Malaysia: foreclosures of businesses and houses, a prolonged slump in the property and stock markets, and high unemployment. He lamented the rising cost of living, especially in cities such as Kuala Lumpur, and said, “Inflation has been rampant and wages stagnant over the past decade. The quality of life has deteriorated. Even eating out [in Kuala Lumpur] has become costly for many people. Imagine a plate of chicken rice that costs RM4.50, even RM5, versus S\$2.50 in Singapore on a wage level that is comparatively lower here.”

Mr. Lim felt that something had been fundamentally wrong over the past decade, when people did not seem to have benefited from the economic growth years before the financial crisis hit in 2008. “Where was the prosperity that the government kept talking about?” he asked. “People just do not feel it.” His disappointment, as he pointed out himself, had come from “the hard-hitting reality on the ground.” Expressing sympathy toward young working adults, especially those who were planning or just starting a family, he cited the exorbitant costs of a marriage banquet, buying a house, getting a car, and other concerns that reflected a sense of his own trepidation for his children’s future. Mr. Lim’s perspective of the world was grim and pessimistic. He did not camouflage his sometimes dark and pensive mood or fatalistic views. “The way I see it, people’s lives are getting more and more difficult, even desperate,” he said, not foreseeing an end to the sources of human suffering and viewing the world as declining. His reflection on the difficult human circumstances (including his own) ruptured by the fickle boom-and-bust cycles of the modern financial and economic system only hardened his fatalistic view of the world. “It is not that I am angry or pessimistic,” he said ironically, “the world can only become a better place provided that people become more compassionate.” Compassion was a powerful moral imperative that he strongly believed would make this world a better, if not more bearable, place to live in. He said compassion “moves people’s hearts so that they could hear the sufferings of others.” The value of compassion—the empathy of suffering with those who suffer, leading to benevolent action—is often cited as the central emphasis of KYCO and a core quality for followers.

There were two significant events in Mr. Lim’s life when he made “personal sacri-

fices”: on the first occasion, he gave a significant sum of money to help an acquaintance—the father of his daughter’s classmate, mired in debt—even though he himself was not financially secure; and on the second occasion, he gave a huge sum of money to help out an old friend who had lost his fortune in the erratic property market. Mr. Lim recounted:

I had a call from an old friend whom I had been worried about, for I knew he was going through very difficult moments in life. I was glad he called, for he was on my mind then. He had been out of work for a year and hoped that I could help in some real estate brokerage deals. He had some clients, but the properties for sale were marginalized properties that did not excite the market at all. Nor were the potential buyers he had genuine. I sensed he was in quite deep financial difficulty and found him emaciating fast! It was not a good sign, especially the latter, as I had just lost a friend to cancer who had had accelerated emaciation just six months before he died. As it was four days to Chinese New Year, I was concerned this filial son, a good husband and father to three sons, may just find the festive season too difficult to face. I called him for a drink. When I passed him a “red packet” and apologized I could not give more, he broke into tears and said: “All my friends have avoided me and refused to help. Without asking, you gave me this.” His tears flowed heavier when he felt the weight of the red packet, which contained a substantial sum—enough to buy a home theater set. I wanted only for him to be able to hold his head high. I told him he was to take his mother in Ipoh and his family for a reunion dinner and to buy them necessities for the New Year, never to let them worry at all. I’ll try to settle his delinquent housing loan. . . . He then subsequently confided in me that now, at the age of 50, he had contracted nose cancer. I had to fight off my tears all that while, as I regretted I was truly unable to really help much more as I too was unemployed and had been medically forced into retirement. I told him that was what brothers were for as we parted!

The suffering of his friends weighed heavily on Mr. Lim; their anguish inflicted as much shame and guilt as it induced compassion and empathy in him. The compassion that Mr. Lim felt for his friends who were down on their luck was inscribed by the shame and guilt he felt over being unable to do more despite his relatively more secure and better-off position in life. Stories of “personal sacrifices” like Mr. Lim’s articulate a situated-ness or consciousness in the world that do not suggest collective advocacy or social action but turn to the importance of personal commitment and individual action. Mr. Lim cast socioeconomic problems within the ambit of personal responsibility and spirituality. He recognized these problems as systemic or structural as well as moral in nature. By thinking about the difficulties that he and his friends had confronted in moral terms, Mr. Lim considered what kind of person he was trying to become or what he could and should be. His perspective emphasized compassion as an end in itself and not so much a means or solution to social problems.

In his narration, Mr. Lim expressed compassion as an ultimate imperative to be pursued with determined effort. According to him, compassion was a matter of heart-work rather than something dogmatic, prescriptive, or coercive. When I asked Mr. Lim

more pointedly to explain what compassion meant to him and what it took to be compassionate, he replied firmly:

My ideal is to be kind, and I will try to be kind. I may not be perfectly kind, but I can be kind any time I want to be. And I do not move toward whether I will be kind; I will be kind whenever I should be and must be kind. That is how I move forward . . . always moving toward something better. Not only kind, but I am going to be kind and caring, kind and helpful, kind and gentle, kind and charitable, kind and noble. I will keep on moving until a time comes when I [can] say that I am going to be selflessly kind . . .

In elaborating on the meaning of compassion, Mr. Lim imagined a “progressive path” toward “selfless kindness” that could be understood as an “unconditional,” “no strings attached,” “without expecting anything in return” type of kindness. More importantly to Mr. Lim, it was a matter of autonomy—“I can be kind any time I want to be”—expressing free will as it pertained to the exercise of compassion. During one of our conversations, I asked Mr. Lim how he knew whether he was successful in his spiritual-moral endeavor. He replied with some bittersweet bemusement, “You will always be a joyous person even if your life is difficult: joyous because you know many others are happier than you—this is selflessness.” Mr. Lim’s response illustrates moral reasoning, which by one’s own means and volition—and effected on one’s thoughts and conduct—is critical to the attainment of compassion as well as a state of peace and happiness.

Compassion is also about skills and practice, particularly empathetic suffering with those who suffer, leading to benevolent action. Spiritual adepts are expected to act on their sense of compassion with a desire to do so, with no strings attached, and without expectation of anything in return. This is best demonstrated through intended acts of charitable giving, defined by the exemplary standards of the Bodhisattva. As an “embodied ethical ideal” (Mrozik 2004), the Bodhisattva is virtue incarnate. This is illustrated in the popular Chinese legend of the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, who in her mortal life as Princess Miao-shan sacrificed herself to save her cruel and despotic father.

“How do we make compassion real, rather than it just being a good idea and an ideal?” I asked Mr. Lim. He highlighted how KYCO had organized visits and raised funds for several charity institutions, including the nondenominational orphanage run by Mother Mangalam of Pure Life Society. He explained empathetically that “real charity” came from self-cultivation and said, “Without skills, you can tell a joke at the wrong time; without wisdom and compassion, you contribute to charity wrongly.” Thus, self-cultivation is critical in opening the heart and connecting one with the feelings of compassion and kindness. Effective self-cultivation also enables practitioners to develop a sense of equanimity and calmness in the face of adversities and adversaries.

Listening with the Heart: Moral Empathy and Skills

During one of our regular suppers at a café near KYCO, I confided in Kiat my increasing frustration with Sifu's Dharma lectures: it had been several months already, and in spite of my efforts, I still did not know what to make of these lectures, which seemed esoteric and didactic to my untrained ears. In his kindly and patient way, Kiat advised me to "open my heart." He said, "Do not feel pressurized to understand everything that Sifu is saying. Just know that the intentions are good, and try to listen with your heart. Listen with a pure heart and go along with your feelings of sincerity and kindness."

By exhorting that I listen with my heart, Kiat suggested that I would be able to perceive the essence of Sifu's Dharma lectures without necessarily understanding them. Kiat's statement points to a form of comprehension or understanding that is not necessarily conceptual. This conception of knowing without understanding is played out between distinctions of the heart and mind, wisdom and knowledge, where the wisdom attained through spiritual practice is distinguished from the kind of knowledge acquired through thinking and reasoning. In other words, knowing is not the same as having knowledge. In order to know, I would first have to learn how to listen with my heart.

Listening to Sifu's Dharma lectures is an exercise in self-discipline, as devotees/followers strive to learn how to improve themselves. Followers take Sifu's Dharma lectures, held two or three times a week, seriously. Attending the lectures constitutes a learning that enriches self-knowledge and purifies the heart. According to Kiat, listening to Sifu's Dharma lectures has enabled him to deal better with life events; it has also helped him become a better person. Listening with the heart is a metonym for discipline. My frustration with the "incomprehensibility" of Sifu's Dharma lectures demonstrated to Kiat that listening was not a passive process: simply listening to Sifu's Dharma lectures does not necessarily make one a follower or a more moral person; one needs to listen with sincerity and conviction, concentration as well as intention.

The effects of Sifu's Dharma lectures are evocative—the lectures attempt to inspire responses such as shame and repentance, humility and equanimity. These are affective dispositions that endow the heart with the capacity to think and feel morally. Sifu's audience reciprocates by "listening properly": during lectures followers sit with their backs straight, take notes, and maintain a serious attitude throughout.

Sifu's oratorical virtuosity is evidenced by his ability to move some of his audience to various states of introspection, elation, and even sadness. But Sifu is reticent about such emotions and passions: emotions are not an end—they must lead to moral transformation. Sifu's rhetorical techniques deployed to effect the desired emotions, passions, and affective dispositions can be outlined in three parts: first, the invocation of human

suffering and misery such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, tensions in the restive southern region of Thailand, and the conflict in the Middle East aim to startle listeners out of their complacency. Natural calamities as well as socio-political unrest around the world provide a rich “eschatological phantasmagoria” (Hirschkind 2001, 631) to draw upon. Second, Dharma lectures edify by reproaching and berating, for example in a lecture on “relationship” Sifu chided his audience:

That is why if anyone has got no love for his or her parents, that is a very, very unfortunate being. Such beings will have much to answer at the end of life, and future lifetimes will surely have an unfortunate life of being rejected in his childhood because whoever does not repay parental love, even the Buddha will not cast His love upon him. . . . So you have to think very, very carefully. If you cannot love your parents, you are someone who is worse than an animal. . . . If we ever ill-treat our parents, then, according to our Path and most religions, this is one way of going down to Hell.

Third, by weaving his lectures into the lived experiences of his audience, Sifu highlights problems of everyday life such as setbacks and anxieties over health, relationships, and work that point toward or can lead to certain solutions and resolutions. The rhetorical method Sifu deploys in his lectures often entails moral exhortation and a call for the practice of self-cultivation. In his lectures, Sifu maps out a system of progression from anxiety and fear to shame and guilt, then to repentance, forgiveness, empathy, and finally compassion. It attempts to prescribe a set of emotions to be experienced by the listener, and seeks to achieve a moral state that is founded upon the embodied capacities of emotion such as the ability to allay anger and to forgive others for their wrongdoings and transgressions (real or perceived), rather than obedience to rules, doctrine, or belief.

The success of Sifu’s Dharma lectures is ultimately dependent on the listening skill of his audience. The cultivation of this listening skill is essential for the audience to be moved as well as to derive meanings and insights from these lectures. Listening with the heart speaks of a moral and disciplinary practice that aims to mold and strengthen resolve; it has less to do with the indoctrination or dissemination of rules than the formation of a sensorium; it seeks neither to persuade nor force but to arouse feelings so as to impart perceptual habits that predispose one toward certain actions and states of mind. It is about developing a moral outlook, about learning to interpret, understand, and act upon the world as “a space of moral action and the actor as a moral being” (*ibid.*, 641).

Sifu’s Dharma lectures focus mainly on the cultivation of perceptual skills and habits that are fundamentally grounded in a morality rather than a concern with tradition, doctrine, or discourse. This is similar to what some scholars have argued in anthropological studies on Islamic and Christian practices—that the conception of what constitutes “apt performance” is “not the apparent repetition of an old form” (Asad 1986, 14–15

in Hirschkind 2001, 641). The perceptual skill of empathy and the disposition of compassion that practitioners seek to cultivate are honed by years of praying, chanting, contemplating, and listening with the heart. Listening with the heart as a disciplinary form of self-cultivation highlights and exaggerates emotions such as pity, joy, and sadness. It evokes a sense of compassion, beauty, gentleness, and grace that magnifies and scrutinizes the processes of feeling, thinking, and empathizing.

Like their predecessors from redemptive societies, KYCO followers are encouraged to “bring forth” their qualities of kindness and compassion through listening with the heart as a way of self-cultivation. The focus on the self is explicit and essential for the cultivation of virtues in order to meet moral or ethical demands and to negate or avoid negative karma. In sharpening one’s sense of self-awareness, it aims to open up potentials and possibilities for the right action instead of restricting and restraining one from wrong conduct. As a form of self-fashioning, self-cultivation is part of an identity project where devotees and followers seek to (re)constitute and transform themselves into the kind of person they think they ought to become, at a time of religious and political tensions marked by episodic violence. Such violence includes the “cow head incident” on August 28, 2009, in which Muslim protestors brought along and desecrated a cow’s head to oppose the relocation of a Hindu temple from one residential area to another in a suburb of Kuala Lumpur (*Boston Globe*, August 29, 2009; Singh 2010).

The virtue of compassion as a bedrock of spiritual and moral life for followers is widely acceptable and generally recognized as an exemplary goal and noble principle for self-cultivation. In this respect, nobody needs any persuasion or compulsion to convince themselves of the immediate merit of Sifu’s teachings. However, followers would have to constantly listen and re-listen, read and reread Sifu’s lectures and teachings, in order to gradually gain many insights into his perspective of the world. The moral dictates and goals articulated in Sifu’s lectures and teachings are challenging to fulfill, but for serious followers they have become a life-consuming pursuit. Standing firm in their conviction, these followers strongly believe that if they cultivate with a true heart and follow Sifu’s instructions closely, it is possible to attain the goal of fully living out the Bodhisattva Vow they have made.

For many devotees and followers of KYCO, self-cultivation is nothing more than an efficacious practice in the ideals of compassion, service, and reverence—one in which people meet other sincere, well-meaning, polite, helpful, and encouraging people, where they find support and friendship in a semi-formalized spiritual and moral fellowship of sorts. For them, self-cultivation is not overtly about freedom or political power but a way that involves potentially a new rationale and understanding. Applied as an everyday life tactic, self-cultivation allows people to “escape without leaving” (De Certeau 2000), even

momentarily, the sometimes uncertain and anxiety-filled situations that are experienced and expressed as suffering. The politics of self-cultivation plays out mainly as an internal drama of the self—reimagining and remaking oneself within the social and political order that contains it, articulated by the moral ideology and inclusive spiritualism of redemptive societies.

Conclusion

This paper describes the spiritual experience and aspirations of a contemporary grass-roots religious movement exemplified by KYCO in Malaysia. It examines KYCO's ethos of inclusive spiritualism, morality, and compassion and situates it within the cultural and historical tradition of redemptive societies and its discourse of the body, self-cultivation, and religious universalism. It also highlights how the spiritual and mundane, the ethical and ideological, the moral and political as well as the self and social are intertwined and mutually constitutive rather than distinct and causal.

On nearly every other day of the week, from early evening until late into the night, the premises of KYCO ring softly with melodic chanting and singing, which adds an ethereal feel to the tranquility of its middle-class suburban neighborhood. There is a keen sense of power, something emanating from the deliberate voice of Sifu echoing through the in-house speakers and in the pensive gaze of his followers. There is no doubt among the followers that the KYCO space they fill almost every second day is abundant with a melancholic but purposeful and contemplative energy. For a few precious hours on those days, KYCO opens up as a space for followers to reflect, to express, and to seek answers to life's complex problems; it is also a place for them to gain strength and find solace in the company of their "brothers and sisters in Dharma." The power or energy that they draw upon, mobilize, and renew is an everyday power of affection as well as personal effectiveness.

Listening to Sifu's Dharma lectures and watching enraptured KYCO followers diligently taking notes and engulfed in their own thoughts, I am alerted to the seriousness with which they take the fulfillment of the Bodhisattva Vow they have taken or, as Sifu said in one of his Dharma lectures, ". . . to transform ourselves from human-hood to Bodhisattva-hood." Transformation and change are central themes in Sifu's teachings, and so are they core ideas in many religious traditions. Yet these traditions, whether in pursuit of sage-hood or Bodhisattva-hood, are not the only or necessarily the main cultural reference points for KYCO followers who also furbish their own understanding from Sai Baba, Tibetan Buddhism, Theosophy, New Age teachings, and popular psychology

references. All these have come to inform the ideas and processes through which they make of themselves the kind of people they think they ought to become—in the terms and principles of inclusive spiritualism. Buddhist compassion is understood as inclusive spiritualism and embodied through moral reasoning as well as self-cultivation that do not compel followers toward any singular or particular truth claim. Instead, it initiates a reflexive and empathetic process of listening with the heart that works on one's anxieties, guilt, and shame as well as hopes and passions in order to help one adapt to or face one's circumstances, fate, and karmic providence.

Followers are enjoined to fulfill their Bodhisattva Vow not through the imposition of codes and rules of conduct or beliefs but through the development of perceptual habits, skills, and ethical capacities as well as reflexivity in terms of what they have to consider for themselves to be apt conduct and moral or ethical action. In the context of contemporary Malaysia, rife with politically charged religious and ethnic tensions as well as economic uncertainties, followers voice these anxieties not as the cause nor condition of suffering but challenges to be overcome by themselves. By working on themselves and their moralities, they have sought to expand their spiritual repertoire or perceptual horizons and emotional capacities charged with social and political potential, where the historical precedent of redemptive societies sheds some light on their moral aspirations and religious experiences.

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